SENATE FISH AND GAME
EXHIBIT NO. 23
DATE 1/20/11
BILL NO. SB 144

January 20, 2011

Senate Fish & Game Committee
Chair: John Brenden (R-Scobey)
Vice Chair: Joe Balyeat (R-Bozeman)
Debby Barrett (R-Dillon)
Tom Facey (D-Missoula)
Steve Gallus (D-Butte)
Brad Hamlett (D-Cascade)
Greg Hinkle (R-Thompson Falls)
Larry Jent (D-Bozeman)
Jim Shockley (R-Victor)
Art Wittich (R-Bozeman)

RE: Opposition to Senate Bill No.144, sponsored by J. Brenden

A BILL FOR AN ACT ENTITLED: "AN ACT GENERALLY PROHIBITING THE DEPARTMENT OF FISH, WILDLIFE, AND PARKS FROM RELOCATING WILD BUFFALO OR BISON OR ALLOWING FREE-ROAMING BISON IN THE STATE; PROVIDING AN EXCEPTION TO THE PROHIBITION FROM RELOCATION; AMENDING SECTION 87-1-216, MCA; AND PROVIDING AN IMMEDIATE EFFECTIVE DATE.

To the Senate Fish and Game Committee:

Mr. Chairman and Honorable members of the Senate Fish and Game Committee, I am providing this written testimony today to express opposition to Senate Bill No. 144. This bill would prevent the relocation or allowance of free-roaming bison in Montana

I would like to take a brief moment to explain my professional history with this issue then get on with my comments:

I am a third generation Montanan and enjoy watching the 4th generation grow up in Montana. I grew up in central Montana where our family was involved in an agricultural business.

I am a former employee of FWP where I conducted wildlife research in Montana for 31 years until my retirement in December 2007. I served as Chief of Wildlife Research in my last position with FWP. As an employee of FWP I was involved in research on brucellosis in bison and elk from 1989-2004 and published several articles on this disease in scientific journals.

I have served as chair of the GYIBC technical committee, on the USDA APHIS National Animal Health Surveillance Committee, on the USAHA brucellosis committee, the USAHA brucellosis science and research committee and chaired the Western Wildlife Health Committee.

I crafted much of the science proposal for the quarantine feasibility study and served as Principal Investigator for the State of Montana until I retired from the State.

I am currently employed as a conservation scientist for the Wildlife Conservation Society one of the oldest conservation organizations in North America (circa 1895). Part of my job involves supporting the activities outlined in our American Bison Society Initiative. The original charter of the American Bison Society dates back to 1905 and resulted in the establishment of several bison reserves in North American including the National Bison Range in Montana.

The Wildlife Conservation Society is opposed to this senate bill for the following reasons:

1) The conservation status of bison across North America was just recently reviewed in 2010. Most bison in North America (96%) are managed in commercial production herds and are privately owned. The status of bison in public herds and herds established for conservation purpose is of great concern to many. The number of bison in North

America managed for conservation is quite small and these bison face many challenges including genetic pollution, small population size, and a confusing legal status. Sixty-one plains bison and eleven wood bison conservation herds were enumerated by that status review. The total number of plains bison in the conservation herds is about 20,500 animals. There are only about 10,300 wood bison and that subspecies is listed as threatened in Canada. There are only 5 herds in North America of sufficient size to be ecologically relevant and genetically sustainable (1000 or more bison), Yellowstone being one of them. Despite the perception that bison are common the conservation herds represent a species very much in need of conservation. The bison in Yellowstone Park are a very rare and unique wildlife resource. This bill, as proposed, seriously constrains the conservation opportunities in North America for the near and long-term at a time when it is most important to conserve the genetically important remnant herds and conserve the species to prevent a potential listing under the Endangered Species Act.

2) The State of Montana has a long history of thoughtfully managing wildlife and always advanced a very progressive conservation agenda-a hallmark feature of our state's wildlife legacy. Few people may know that the Montana legislature began passing laws to protect wild game, including bison, as far back as 1864, long before the federal government or private conservation organizations responded to the call for wildlife preservation. Montana is unique in that bison were never removed from game animal status as established by early legislatures. In fact, Montana is currently the only state that considers bison a species of concern in its Comprehensive Fish and Wildlife Conservation Strategy. These are appropriate designations for this majestic animal and they are consistent with the wonderful conservation history of this great state. The historic call to advance wild bison conservation remains legitimate in Montana and needs renewed commitment from political leaders, sporting public, general citizens and the conservation community.

3) The bison from and in Yellowstone are highly valued wildlife partly because of their important genetic character and because they could serve as a source stock to build other important conservation herds for hunting and general enjoyment by the public. These bison embody critical genetic material necessary for the long-term conservation of this iconic species. Although there are many bison herds in North America, Yellowstone may be the last bison populations known to be free of cattle genes. Unfortunately cattle genes were introduced into the American bison at the turn of the century and are present in many of the conservation herds, including the one at Moiese. Yellowstone bison are the **only** Plains bison herd with a continuous genetic link to ancient DNA. It would not be prudent conservation management to introduce Yellowstone bison, with no cattle genes, into the population at Moiese. Protecting and conserving the long-term genomic integrity of these bison is essential to the future of this species may be essential to prevent a listing under the Endangered Species Act. By conserving the genetics of Yellowstone bison through establishment of several satellite herds we are insuring the future of this genetic pool and increasing the opportunity for human interaction with a historically important Big Game species.

4) Regarding risk for disease transmission from bison and specifically the Yellowstone quarantine bison I would like to add these comments.

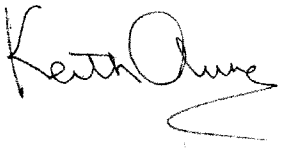
   a. The quarantine protocol used to classify bison as disease free is a very rigorous protocol established by the Greater Yellowstone Interagency Brucellosis Committee and approved by the United States Animal Health Association. The best scientists

and animal health regulators in the world were convened by GYIBC to develop this protocol which was eventually adopted into the Interagency Bison Management Plan and published as an APHIS Uniform Method and Rule. This rule was reviewed by the USAHA brucellosis committee and examined extensively by other scientists and veterinarians around the world.

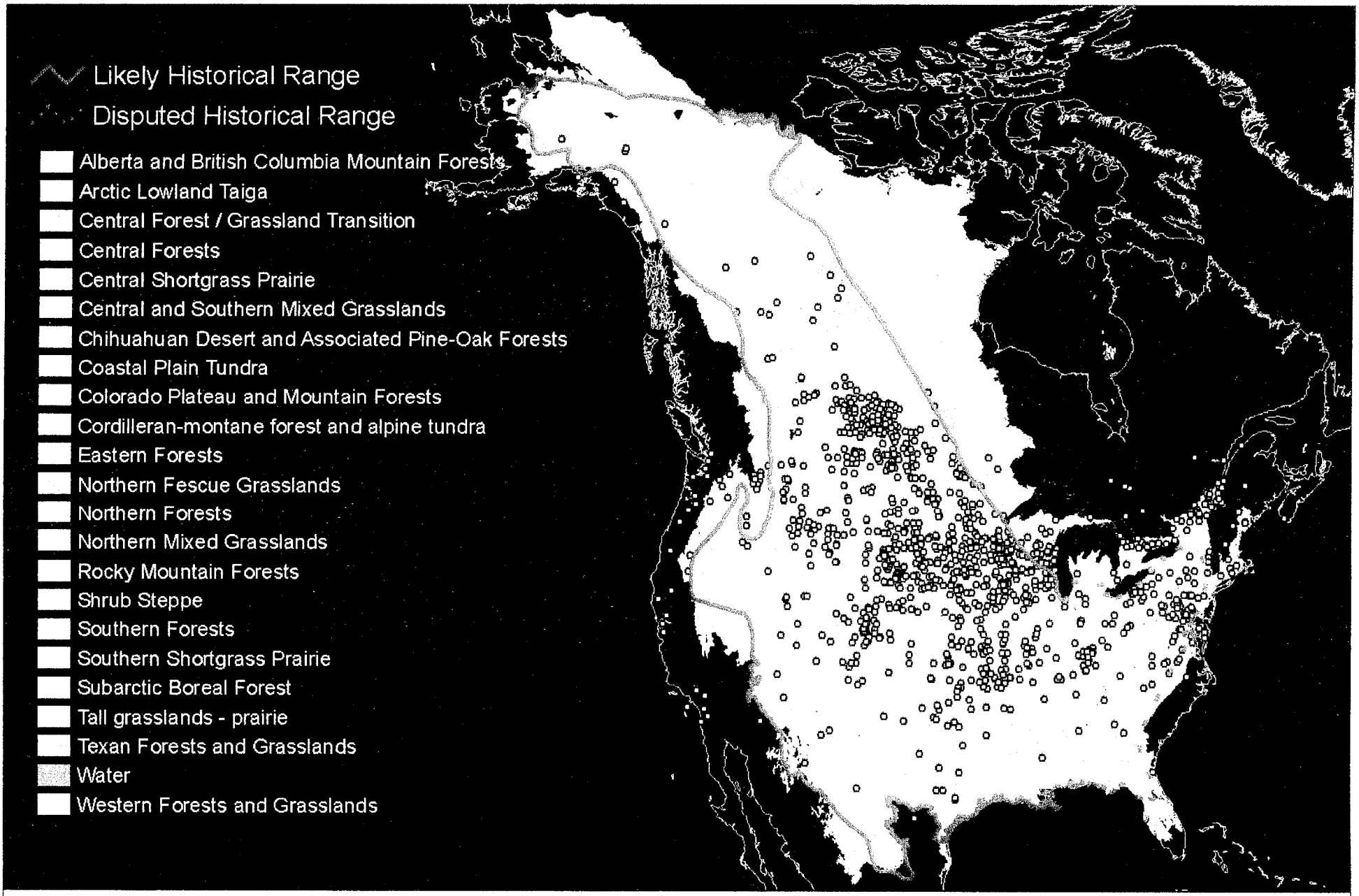
b. In addition to meeting Federal/State animal health regulatory standards the quarantine study actually **ADDED** features to the protocol In other words these animals have not only met but **exceeded** the published regulatory standards to be classed "disease free". There are no more tested and examined bison in the world! If this standard is not high enough then we would like to know what standard will make the grade.
c. Finally, bison as a species have no greater potential to spread disease than any other hoofed ungulate from the wild or livestock for that matter. Most bison herds in North America are not diseased and pose no great risk to agriculture and, in fact, bison commonly live along side cattle all across the Nation (see attached map or known bison herds).

A recent survey by the American Bison Society showed that More than 74% of the American Public believes that bison are extremely important living symbol of the American West. Here in Montana we have a unique opportunity to conserve this symbol. We have a chance to meet the conservation needs of this species while protecting an equally important ranching industry. The truth is, many other states and Indian Tribes are already showing us the way. Utah just recently reintroduced bison to the Book Cliffs in cooperation with the Ute Tribe and Alaska is working on a restoration project with first nations in the Yukon. These states are building healthy conservation herds that can be experienced by the public in many ways including annual hunts. There are other examples of successful bison restoration alongside agriculture in Saskatchewan and even Mexico. In addition, many Indian Tribes across North America are working hard to establish cultural herds on the large landscapes they manage and reconnecting in their own way with wild bison. All of these conservation efforts come from the position that the conservation of bison provide positive benefits that we can all share and enjoy. We, in Montana, have a unique opportunity to find a way forward with agricultural and conservation interests being served equally. Unfortunately, this bill will not help us find that path but will take the positive benefits from a valued wildlife resource and exchange them for a blemish on Montana's conservation history and national image.

Respectfully



Keith Aune
The Wildlife Conservation Society



WILDLIFE CONSERVATION SOCIETY

CURRENT BISON HERDS (Domestic and Wild)

N

1:37,507,154

Projection: North America Albers Equal Area Conic